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How to Retire at 45

In the CIA, says Ralph McGehee all
you have to do is tell the truth.

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Ralph McGehee '50 joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1952, shortly after he was cut from the Green Bay Packers. He's not sure why the CIA approached him, but during his intelligence training he met so many other pro football dropouts that he suspects the agency considered the National Football League a prime recruiting ground.

When the Korean War ended in 1953 McGehee joined the agency's clandestine operations section as a case officer. Over the next two decades he served in the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam. He did the routine work of an intelligence officer: recruiting agents, conducting investigations, and maintaining liaison with the local police and intelligence organizations.

During that era the CIA's main struggle was against Communist insurgency in Southeast Asia. That

struggle was a losing one. Of all the countries in the region, today only Thailand remains allied to the West. McGehee thinks he knows why our side lost the rest.

In 1965 McGehee directed an intelligence gathering effort in a province in northeast Thailand where a Communist insurgency was beginning. After a detailed, yearlong study, McGehee reported that he had found a popular movement so broad, pervasive and deeply rooted that purely military measures were unlikely to defeat it.

McGehee submitted his findings to the agency but, after a brief period of praise for this work, he ran into an official wall in Washington.

His findings, he explains, ran counter to the official Washington view that Communist insurgency was a form of clandestine invasion, and that the natives involved were unwilling participants who were duped or forced into joining guerilla units who took their arms and orders from outside.

McGehee maintains that intelligence

information often is politicized. In theory, the agency provides accurate and unbiased information to the President so he can make wise decisions regarding national security. In practice, when a President is firmly committed to a particular policy (such as military victory in Vietnam), the agency shapes its information to conform to that policy. Bad or even inconvenient news is unwelcome. That is an abiding theme in the history of intelligence, and it is the rock on which Ralph McGehee foundered.

After he submitted his dissenting report, McGehee's career took a nose-dive. He was shuttled from one low-level job to another. He was promised promotions but never received them.

He was frustrated as he watched his country wage the wrong kind of war in Southeast Asia, one he knew was doomed to failure. He did what he could

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